

**Louis Sicking.** *Frontières d'Outre-Mer: La France et les Pays-Bas dans le monde atlantique au XIXe siècle.* Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2006. 207 pp. EUR 28.00, paper, ISBN 978-2-84654-148-0.



**Reviewed by** Henriette De Bruyn Kops

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In *Frontières d'Outre-Mer*, Louis Sicking treats us to a thorough examination of the political relations between France and the Netherlands over the areas where their colonial territories shared borders on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. The publication of this well-written monograph on nineteenth-century international relations coincides with the reappearance in the news of one of its cases, a border dispute that started in 1855 following the discovery of gold near the fuzzy frontier between French and Dutch Guyana, reminding us that past events often serve as the foundation of current affairs. Arbitration by Tsar Alexander III seemingly resolved the issue in 1891. The dispute has nevertheless flared up repeatedly ever since, albeit with modifications. The tug-of-war over the inland area, rich in gold deposits, continues to this day; as recently as September 2007, a United Nations arbitration commission ruled that French Guyana and Surinam (the erstwhile Dutch colony) will have to share the wealth derived from oil presumed to be present under offshore waters claimed by both.[1] Such economic driving forces crop up throughout Sicking's meticulous study of colonial and internation-

al relations, and provide the tools to understand not only the geopolitical and economic forces underpinning the decisions made by a range of players in French and Dutch territories, but also their enduring power.

In his masterly earlier work, *Neptune and the Netherlands: State, Economy, and War at Sea in the Renaissance* (2004), Sicking explored the maritime history of the Habsburg Netherlands and the country's relations with Europe's other maritime nations in the sixteenth century. Here, his focus is narrower, yet not less satisfying. Compared to the ample historiography on Anglo-French and Anglo-Dutch relations, Sicking's new book provides a welcome expansion into the rather neglected topic of French-Dutch colonial-diplomatic history. It is, therefore, disappointing that Sicking decided to write this book in French, as publication in English could have given a much larger audience access to the wealth of information he presents and could have opened the door to more comparative work by scholars not versed in French. It is to be hoped that a translation is forthcoming.

This study benefits from a clearly defined topic and coherent structure. The three areas of French-Dutch contact in the Caribbean, Africa's Gold Coast, and the Guyanas are each analyzed in three layers in three distinct periods. Sicking systematically discusses the ideas of—and roles played by—central governments, colonial officials in situ, and local populations. The three regional studies are cemented together by the introduction, which shows how the place both countries occupied on the global stage in each period determined their specific reactions, and by the conclusion, which compares both nations' overall strategy vis-à-vis their overseas territories. In addition to the particular regional points of contact in the Atlantic basin, Sicking analyzes the motives and methods of French colonial officials to push the central government into expansionist projects, the reactions these proposed projects elicited from the Dutch, the existence and effectiveness of lobbying groups, and the significant power of local populations. The author acknowledges the relatively limited scope of the book, circumscribed by the existence of only three contact areas, but I would argue that Sicking is too modest because he has used this as an opportunity to dig deep and write the definitive study on the topic. He also provides ample proof that geopolitical realities far beyond these specific locales influenced the decisions made in—or for—the territories under review. The specters of the British Empire and growing German power lurk behind many decisions made by both Dutch and French governments. As French initiatives to expand into Dutch-held areas anchor the three studied cases, Sicking has based his work on a range of colonial-French sources from the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, including official correspondence and reports on the local populations, supplemented by printed Dutch primary and secondary sources. This has resulted in a narrative that centers on French actions and Dutch re-actions, although by no means exclusively.

One of the book's strengths is Sicking's careful examination of the terms "colonialism" and "imperialism" and the fuzzy border between the two terms. Within the period 1815-1914, he identifies two major phases (1815-70 and 1880-1914) buffered by a transitional decade (1870 to 1880). In this chronology, true imperialism did not emerge until 1880, and it consisted of concurrent streams of preemption and contiguity. "Preemption" describes the sudden claim to global rights and territories by newcomers to colonization, such as Germany and Italy, who feared being excluded from the land grab. "Contiguity" describes the expansion of existing colonial powers from areas already under their control into neighboring territories. In many cases of contiguous expansion, European control spread from coastal areas into the interior. France and the Netherlands operated as colonial powers long before 1815, so most of their activities in new territories, adjacent to existing holdings, exemplify the continuity of colonial expansion rather than an unprecedented jump into imperialism, as executed by Germany and Italy in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Historical developments, however, led France and the Netherlands to different approaches and attitudes toward their respective overseas possessions. Sicking argues that France never had a "true policy for colonial expansion" but instead worked on the basis of "multiple and disparate initiatives in response to immediate concerns" (p. 18). This changed after the country's defeat at German hands in 1870-71 when French nationalism cast about for a way to repair its tattered self-esteem and led to the expansionist policies of the last decades of the century. Henri L. Wesseling, Sicking's mentor, noted that the French admired the Dutch colonial model that they carefully studied when they became serious about their own imperial expansion.[2] Dutch colonialism was based on the territories controlled by the East and West India Companies. The Dutch government purchased all West India Company shares in 1791,

while the revolutionary government of the Batavian Republic nationalized the East India Company in 1795. Having lost most of their overseas possessions to stronger powers over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Dutch were fiercely protective of the East Indies, the jewel in their shrinking colonial crown. As a puny nation with a huge Asian colony, the Dutch neither could nor would compete with other European nations in the imperialistic land grab. Instead, they increased their level of control within the Malay Archipelago while maintaining strict neutrality on the global stage in order not to offend any of the larger powers and thus risk losing their colony in a war. Geopolitical considerations played a role in the resolution of the three expansion projects studied by Sicking, but in each case local initiatives and developments across the shared borders, not the existence of official policies or models, spearheaded French-Dutch colonial diplomacy at the national level.

Part 1, the shortest segment, covers bilateral relations across the miniscule frontier that divides one small Caribbean island into French Saint Martin and Dutch Sint Maarten since the amicable partition of 1648. In the mid-nineteenth century, conditions in the Caribbean and on the island triggered two French initiatives to annex the Dutch portion through negotiations. In 1843, France's regional naval commander favored annexation, because only a unified Saint Martin could serve as a strategic military point of support in France's colonial system. Ten years later, the goal to have complete control over the exploitation of the island's salt pans had become France's main argument in favor of annexation. In 1853, the Dutch government appeared willing to cede its part of Sint Maarten, but only if taken together with the tiny islands of Sint Eustatius and Saba. The annexation projects came to naught as discouraging economic realities on the ground outpaced diplomatic maneuvers in Paris and The Hague. Dutch planters demanded indemnification for the emancipation of their slaves, automatic

once the whole island became French, yet the government in Paris anticipated the abolition of slavery in all Dutch overseas territories and so refused to pay for what would soon cost nothing. The scattered implementations of formal abolition of slavery (British territories--1833, French--1848, Netherlands--1863) created a restless labor market in the Caribbean, with emancipated and escaped slaves migrating to territories where they were paid for their labor. Even prior to the French emancipation, Dutch slave owners on Sint Maarten petitioned King Willem II in 1844 for the local right to emancipate their slaves to retain sufficient labor for their operations; the Dutch government denied the request, because it was unwilling to set a legal precedent for its other colonial possessions. Ultimately, the French annexation schemes never made sufficient economic sense, and the island remains binational to this day.

In contrast to the actual colonial sovereignty over Saint Martin, French and Dutch holdings along the Gold Coast of Africa remained limited to fortified settlements and shifting spheres of interest in which both the French and the Dutch depended on the willingness of local rulers to tolerate their presence. In part 2, Sicking explores the international treaties and regional realities that led France and the Netherlands to share African frontiers from 1867, when an Anglo-Dutch land swap made them neighbors, to the end of 1870, when the French government ordered the evacuation of its coastal trading posts. Sicking sets this brief period of actual neighborly relations in its much longer historical context. Two key points stand out. First, the delicate balance among native powers in the region was built on a number of well-established alliances between various native peoples with the Dutch, French, or British. Negotiations for territorial swaps among Europeans, actual exchanges, and the French departure from the coast wreaked havoc on these traditional alliances, and led to increased tension and warfare among the African states. Second, the opening of

the Suez Canal in 1869 and Germany's victory over France in 1871 forced European governments to rapidly realign their foreign policies and readjust their colonial priorities. Deteriorating local conditions and the new geopolitical situation led France to abandon the Gold Coast in 1870, while the Dutch government chose to concentrate on its colonial efforts in Asia and handed over its coastal holdings to Great Britain in 1872. From 1880 onward, full-blown imperialism created new frontiers all over Africa, although not between these two imperial powers.

The third case examines a river boundary disputed by both countries. On the northern coast of South America, two Guyanas--Dutch and French--had shared a blurry border since the mid-seventeenth century, but a treaty in 1770 established the Maroni River as the official frontier. Two tributaries combine to create the Maroni, and the area between these two branches first became economically interesting to the Europeans as a source of tropical forestry products in 1848; the stakes rose on the discovery of small amounts of gold in 1855. A binational scientific expedition measured the water flow entering the Maroni from each tributary in 1861, and declared the Lawa River, the larger contributor, to be the source of the Maroni and thus the official frontier between the two colonies to the benefit of the Dutch. The diplomatic gloves came off in 1875 after a geological expedition predicted the existence of more significant gold deposits in the Maroni basin, and steadily increasing yields fueled a gold rush of thousands of prospectors into the region. Competing groups of Maroons, escaped slaves and their descendants, controlled river transport and thus the access to these inland territories. Sicking provides clear examples of the power of these populations to influence local circumstances in their favor by highlighting the power structure among the different groups and the way they used their transportation leverage to broker deals with Europeans, and by comparing it to the leverage of the inhabitants of the Gold Coast region who also

controlled the routes into the interior. In 1887, France proposed to split the disputed area amicably, but the Dutch refused to share, insisting instead on the favorable delineation of the border as per the decision of the 1861 scientific commission. The impasse was lifted through a classic piece of diplomatic horse trading involving the new Suez Canal. France needed Dutch ratification of the 1888 Suez agreement that expanded control over the canal from exclusive British control to an international commission (including France), while the Dutch insisted on an all-or-nothing decision on the Guyana frontier through the impartial arbitration of Tsar Alexander III. (Had the French government--and Sicking--focused on the intertwined genealogy of the Romanovs and the Oranges, they might not have considered the tsar impartial: Anna Pawlona Romanov was both King Willem III's mother and the tsar's great-aunt.) In 1891, to French dismay, the tsar ruled in favor of the Dutch position by assigning the whole area west of the Lawa River to Dutch Guyana. Yet, even if historical precedent seemingly secured the official border between the two colonial powers, in reality, different Maroon groups continued to lay claims over the areas they inhabited. As noted at the start of this review, this particular territorial tug-of-war continues at the highest international levels.

Sicking has produced a highly accessible study that clarifies the intricate interactions among French and Dutch colonialism's layers of participants and budding imperialism. The compact book should be on the reading list of anyone interested in nineteenth-century geopolitics and especially of graduate seminars. Combining thorough research, insightful analysis, and clear prose, Sicking offers those who read French a master class in history.

#### Notes

[1]. Thomas W. Donovan, "Suriname-Guyana Maritime and Territorial Disputes: A Legal and Historical Analysis," *Journal of Transnational*

*Law and Policy* 13, no. 1 (2003): 42-98; and "Een ruzie minder tussen Suriname en Guyana, *NRC Handelsblad*, September 21, 2007, <http://www.nrc.nl/buitenland/article772606.ece/EenruziemindertussenSurinameenGuyana>.

[2]. Henri L. Wesseling, *Imperialism and Colonialism: Essays on the History of European Expansion* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1997), esp. 38-58.

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